
SOUTH CAROLINA FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

2006 RECOMMENDATIONS

SUBMITTED TO

HUGH E. WEATHERS

SOUTH CAROLINA COMMISSIONER OF AGRICULTURE

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BACKGROUND OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

Beginning in March 2005, volunteers formed a steering committee to begin the discussion and exploration of creating a statewide food policy council. The council would serve as a forum for sharing ideas and programs and to provide an opportunity to propose solutions and initiatives to state leaders. Ultimately, the goal of the council would be to work toward the improvement and expansion of healthier and more informed food choices by South Carolinians.

Based on the information gathered by the steering committee, the general consensus of the meetings determined there was a need to form a South Carolina Food Policy Council. Therefore, the steering committee drafted bylaws and invited citizens and agency representatives to serve on a voluntary Board of Directors.

On March 17, 2006, the S.C. Food Policy Council (FPC) held its first general membership meeting and continued to meet throughout the year. General members of the Council include representatives from state government agencies, university faculty members, agricultural commodity associations, food banks, farmers, elected officials, and agribusiness representatives.

After initial introductions and sharing of ideas, the group broke out into various subcommittees so that members could participate in and share information regarding topics in which members have experience or interest in.

As part of the FPC's responsibilities under its bylaws, this annual report has been prepared by the Board of Directors. The report represents the discussion, ideas and issues of concern that members of the Council shared during the meetings throughout the year. The report is intended to provide insight regarding areas within the South Carolina food production system that can be improved upon or initiated to make life taste better and healthier for all South Carolinians.

AGRICULTURE PRODUCTION, FOOD INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Preserve existing agricultural processing/production facilities and attract new facilities.

This goal helps keep dollars in state and also works towards greater food security in our state. As a result, commodities are processed here and readily available to consumers in addition to being grown here.

A prime example of an agricultural processing facility supporting South Carolina agriculture is Adluh Flour in downtown Columbia. Established in 1900, Adluh currently purchases and processes white corn, yellow corn, wheat and other grain crops to make a variety of products such as grits, pancake mix, hushpuppy mix, biscuit mix, muffin mixes and a wide variety of other dry food mixes and products. Adluh provides services to a wide variety of customers, including the South Carolina public school food service program, local restaurants, and local convenience stores.

In addition, Adluh also makes a concerted effort to purchase South Carolina grain products whenever possible to support the local agricultural industry in South Carolina. As recently as 1942, Adluh was one of approximately 42 operating flour mills in South Carolina. Today, Adluh Flour is the last operating flour mill in the State.

The FPC recommends that the South Carolina Department of Agriculture work with the South Carolina Department of Revenue and county governments to explore tax programs and benefits that could act as an incentive for new food grade processing facilities and agribusinesses, as well as supporting current operations. One example might be extending the agricultural property tax rate and definition to include agribusinesses that directly process agricultural products into food. Historically the special tax rate for agriculture has been in place to encourage, to preserve and to support local agricultural production. Today, the need to encourage and maintain agricultural processing facilities within the state is just as great.

The FPC also recommends that the South Carolina Department of Agriculture work closely with the South Carolina Department of Commerce to:

- a. Identify new opportunities for agricultural processing/production facilities to locate in South Carolina.
- b. Provide incentives and guidance to encourage new facilities, relocation and improvement to current facilities located in South Carolina.

2. Acquire a shrimp processing facility located within the state.

Currently South Carolina does not have a shrimp processing facility. The benefits of having our own processing facility in-state include:

- a. Promotion and identification of shrimp and fish legitimately caught or raised in S.C.
- b. Protection of the integrity of South Carolina products by monitoring and inspecting "fresh" shrimp sales venues set up on roadside stands, flea markets and other impromptu venues.
- c. Consumer identification by providing value to legitimate South Carolina seafood products and consumer protection by reducing misrepresentation; products are caught or raised in South Carolina, and processed here.

To further this goal, it would be beneficial to have misrepresentation legislation regarding Truth in Menu and Truth in Advertising related to advertisement of South Carolina seafood products. The committee recommends investigating Florida legislation that specifically addresses false advertising of fish products on menus, and exploring the benefits of implementing similar legislation here in South Carolina.

3. Help farmers add value to their products.

Helping farmers find ways to add value to their raw commodities can be the key to meeting high consumer demand for "ready to eat" products. It also results in higher profits for farmers, thereby ensuring continued agricultural production in South Carolina. One example of a program that could greatly benefit small producers is the construction of DHEC approved community kitchens.

A community kitchen is a facility that a South Carolina producer could sign up to use at certain dates and times to process his product. For example, a farmer growing fresh collard greens could come to a community kitchen to wash and package his product. The farmer's marketing research has shown that customers are more likely to purchase his product if it has been packaged this way and they will be willing to pay more for the processed product versus the raw, unpackaged collards.

Another use of the community kitchen would be for consumers who are interested in using an approved facility to can and sell their homemade preserves or pickled products. Currently if a citizen wants to sell his homemade preserves to the public, DHEC requires homemade products to be prepared in an approved facility. A community kitchen would provide and encourage interested citizens to process their homemade recipes in an appropriate facility, while making their products available for sale to the public.

Therefore, the FPC suggests that the Department create a study committee to explore the feasibility of creating and maintaining a community kitchen in South Carolina to help small farmers add value to their products.

4. Improve communication and marketing to consumers.

Citizens don't know where to find local products and are unsure of product availability. There is an overall need to increase awareness and consumption of South Carolina products by South Carolinians.

The FPC also recommends that the SCDA focus on:

- a. Marketing to large in-state buyers like schools and hospitals.
- b. Educate producers about the benefits and opportunities of niche marketing.
- c. Move away from only marketing primary commodity products.

We believe that continued funding and expansion of the SC Quality Program through the Department of Agriculture should be a top priority to benefit South Carolina consumers and South Carolina farmers.

5. Incorporate family and consumer science, as well as agriculture into the public school and college curricula.

Many members of the FPC believe there is a link between health concerns, diet and stifled eating choices due to limited food preparation knowledge. As our society has moved towards eating out more frequently and purchasing ready-to-eat meals, many young persons in our society have limited food choices. Consumers are not directly aware of menu items nutritional value and their home-cooked meal choices are limited because they don't know how to prepare unprocessed food products. The changing school curricula have moved away from offering basic home economic courses and basic life skills courses. Typically these courses include food preparation techniques and hands-on activities. The FPC recommends increased efforts to offer home economics and agricultural courses in our high school and college curricula. The addition of these components will help develop students' appreciation and understanding of food production in our state, while giving them tools they need to be healthy, productive members of society. Component elements could include training in basic cooking techniques and basic nutrition.

6. Investigate reciprocity relationship with Georgia & other neighboring states.

Currently statutory law does not allow for the sale of SC products at GA markets, but there is no similar prohibition against selling GA produce at SC roadside stands. The FPC suggests investigating legislation to better safeguard South Carolina producers as well as trade practices between states. South Carolina should not tolerate a marketing situation that puts its producers at a disadvantage when competing with neighboring states for the local food dollar.

Georgia farmers markets, for example, are prohibited from accepting South Carolina melons to be offered for sale during peak season when there are Georgia melons available. In contrast, South Carolina does not prohibit Georgia melons from being sold in direct competition with domestic melons during peak season.

7. Promote and advocate for smart growth.

The FPC recommends limiting unrestricted development through:

- a. Implementing land use plans and zoning.
- b. Enforcing county-implemented comprehensive zoning and planning requirements.

The FPC encourages the SC Department of Agriculture to become more actively involved in educating and increasing awareness of South Carolina agriculture to state, regional and county planning committees. This could include having a designated representative in the Department who has a background or experience in planning and who can also serve as a resource to planners and county government officials needing assistance and an understanding of agriculture and its impact in their area. By exploring new partnerships and participating more actively in regional and statewide planning activities, the Department will be helping to ensure the continued growth, development and benefits of agriculture production in the most appropriate areas throughout South Carolina.

Other potential initiatives include:

- a. Creating an incentive for keeping or preserving open greenspace.
- b. Incentives for markets and grocery stores that locate in populated centers, reducing sprawl.
- c. Creating and improving preferences for school systems and local government to buy local and support their local economies with their food purchases whenever possible.

- d. Make agriculture more profitable for farmers by reversing the trend of farmers selling land to developers. Generally farmers can make more money by selling their land to developers; agriculture needs to be more profitable.

8. Make SC cities more attractive and unique by having terrific food.

The FPC recommends capitalizing on the fact that people who come to visit South Carolina often come to enjoy the food as much as they come to enjoy the sights! Encouraging visitors to have a positive eating experience and highlighting the goods produced in this state are great ways to promote various eating styles.

A great example of this type of effort can be seen in the Carolina Food Pros tours in Charleston. CFP offers guided tours through Charleston looking at historic places and visiting various eating establishments and vendors who provide the culinary spice of Charleston. Other cities such as Columbia and Greenville should also be able to capitalize on great food preparation and food choices from local or regional produce.

9. Make agriculture a priority opportunity endorsed by the Department of Commerce.

For example, ask to have agricultural speakers or representatives at the table or on the program regarding discussion of rural development and agritourism in South Carolina.

Potential solutions include:

- a. A SCDA staff person responsible for attending meetings and opening the doors of communication between these two agencies and industries.
- b. Develop a strong link and working relationship with the Tourism industry in South Carolina.

These are the top two industries in the state and are natural partners for the promotion of Agritourism in our state.

10. Address the aging farm community population in SC.

The FPC recommends the SCDA work towards ensuring continued farming operations and preservation of greenspace by:

- a. Recruiting new farmers into the state.
- b. Assisting with the transfer of farming property from one generation to the next without undue cost, so long as the property remains a working farm.
- c. Encouraging preservation of land for production and as greenspace.
- d. Developing a land-link program that can provide or structure a financial and management incentive package for all parties involved. One example of this type of organization is the North Carolina Farm Transition Network; a non-profit group focused on providing resources and assisting farmers in planning for the continuation of their farms, either passing it along to heirs or transferring the farm to a non-heir interested in maintaining the farming operation.

11. Support existing and implement new food nutrition programs.

Making sure that ALL South Carolinians have access to fresh fruits and vegetables is a priority issue that the FPC strongly supports.

Unfortunately, there are people in our state who face immense challenges in living month to month and knowing where their next meal might come from. In an annual U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) survey of hunger in the United States released in November 2006, South Carolina had the highest rate of households with "very low food security" of all the 50 states at 6.3%. That compares unfavorably with a national average in 2005 of 3.8%. As our community markets grow throughout the state, the FPC believes it is important that all citizens should have access to these fresh products. Many local markets are located in areas where it might otherwise be difficult to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables, such as downtown Columbia.

The FPC is aware of the SC Department of Agriculture's pilot program for community markets accepting Electronic Benefits Transfer cards (EBT). These EBT cards are part of the Federal food assistance program and allow qualified recipients to use federal funds for the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables. The Cards are like a debit card and require a special card reader at the checkout line to access the funds. . The long-term goal is to see this pilot program expanded so that all community markets are able to accept payment through EBT cards. Based on the initial findings of the pilot program, the FPC hopes to identify future funding to provide EBT card readers and training for market managers, so that community farmers markets in every county can provide service to everyone in the community.

CONSUMER AWARENESS & EDUCATION, FOOD NUTRITION & HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support funding of USDA school fruit and vegetable snack program.

The USDA school fruit and vegetable snack program is a relatively new program that has been operating in a few test states. The program provides "snacks" to students over and above those fruits and vegetables already provided as part of the school lunch program. The FPC believes this is a worthwhile program that would greatly benefit the children in South Carolina. The Council recommends becoming one of the test states or push to have the school fruit and vegetable snack program available to all states. In order to accomplish this goal, the FPC believes that it should solicit letters of support from the Food Policy Council members to send to appropriate Congressional representatives and program coordinators. Leadership from the SC Department of Agriculture in gathering statewide support for this Federal program would be greatly appreciated.

2. Support funding of "SC Quality" branding and promotional program with the SC Department of Agriculture.

The FPC recommends increasing funding and staff support for the Department's branding program to promote the utilization and purchase of South Carolina produce.

The SC Quality program should:

- a. Help consumers identify South Carolina products and ask for them by name.
- b. Provide a standard of quality that helps to set off South Carolina products as being fresh, top of the line produce.

The Council believes that a letter of support to the Legislature from the FPC Board will help to further this goal. In addition, the FPC recommends asking for council members' assistance and support of the Department in its continued requests for funding from the legislature for the SC Quality program.

3. Educate consumers/create awareness about nutrition and access to quality healthy foods.

The FPC recommends the development of a SC Food Policy Council website to be updated and maintained by the South Carolina Department of Agriculture. A centralized resource can create greater consumer awareness and understanding of nutrition and quality healthy food choices. Sharing information and having various program materials readily available on the website, would provide a valuable resource for program directors looking for specific information when working with their target groups to gain an understanding of agriculture and nutrition. This website can also serve as a centralized area providing updates and information to various program directors when they are looking for and applying for grant and program funding, thereby reducing duplication and increasing potential partnerships for programs with shared goals.

Other approaches to increasing consumer awareness and understanding of healthy South Carolina food products:

- a. Attempt to increase state appropriations for consumer education, thereby increasing the purchase of SC Products.
- b. Assistance by individuals and supporting organizations of the Council in the promotion of the Quality symbol and increasing consumer awareness of the program in their normal outreach activities; teach consumers to ask for and look for South Carolina Quality products when they are shopping and dining out.
- c. Pursue partnerships with non-traditional sources for funding of educational endeavors related to agriculture and food production, health and nutrition.

4. Establish "Farm to Institution" programs in SC.

Many other states have adopted farm to school and other similar programs whereby public and private entities are purchasing and utilizing more local produce as part of their normal operating programs. The FPC recommends a number of different ways that the Department could further the development of these types of programs in South Carolina including:

- a. Increasing collaboration with private entities regarding the purchase and support of South Carolina producers and products.
- b. Revising procurement code; enable state institutions to have more power to purchase locally grown foods and products over imported products.
- c. Appointing a study committee to review other "Farm to School" programs in other states and to create the structure and oversight of similar programs here in South Carolina.

CLOSING REMARKS

The Council has served as a forum for its members to share their concerns as well as to share their progress on related programs and initiatives that are related to the food system here in South Carolina. The networking opportunities and the information shared at these meetings have greatly benefited many of the members of the Council and they hope that the ideas and thoughts contained in this report will also serve you in your role as Commissioner of Agriculture working towards the continued growth, promotion and protection of our agricultural industry and food supply in South Carolina.